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ABSTRACT

Because Australia does not include listening instruction in its higher education curriculum does not mean that Australians deny its significance as an important communication skill. Rather, the assumption is that the best place to teach listening is in the elementary schools, a contention that few educators would reject. Four specific recommendations for the development of listening education in the Australian educational system are: (1) listening instruction should begin in and be part of the elementary school curriculum; (2) listening tests should be adapted to specific populations; (3) in the speech communication curriculum, listening should be taught early and often; and (4) listening instruction should emphasize all forms of listening. The exploration and sharing of research questions and pedagogical methods could be of significant value for scholars and teachers in America and Australia, and could improve listening instruction in both countries. (Thirteen references are appended.) (MS)

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LISTENING IN AUSTRALIA: LESSONS FROM DOWN UNDER

Paper presented to the Eastern Communication Association

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LISTENING IN AUSTRALIA: LESSONS FROM DOWN UNDER

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PERSONAL PREFACE

In 1986 I received a one-year appointment as a Visiting Fellow in Communication Studies at the Chisholm Institute of Technology in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia. In addition to full-time teaching duties, I undertook a project designed to review the status of listening research and instruction in Australia. Having taught listening in America for over sixteen years, I wanted to study the ways in which another country approached this subject. In July of 1987, I presented my review of Australian listening research and instruction to the Australian Communication Association (Engleberg, 1987). Since then, I have had time to reconsider these findings as they relate to listening instruction in America. The recommendations in this paper are based, therefore, on the "Lessons from Down Under."

INTRODUCTION

In Australia's institutions of higher education, listening is rarely included in the curriculum. Occasionally, collegiate listening instruction appears as an aberration, taught or inspired by visited or transplanted American academics. This

absence of listening instruction is not the oversight of a "backward" or "uninformed" professoriate. The exclusion of listening from the Communication Studies curriculum is a conscious decision. Listening is not taught in Australian colleges or universities because, in the opinion of many Australian academics, it does not belong in the tertiary (higher education) curriculum. This position does not deny the significance of listening as an important communication skill. Rather, it assumes that the best place to teach listening is in the elementary schools. Few educators, Australian or American, would reject this contention.

Before discussing any lessons to be learning from listening instruction in Australia, it is necessary to provide a brief description of the tertiary (higher) education system in Australia. All institutions of higher education are government funded and government controlled. There are no private colleges or universities - yet. Other than a recently instituted $250 administrative fee, higher education is free regardless of curriculum. There is, however, a human cost to such a system. Admission to tertiary education is highly selective and largely based on a series of written examinations. The government and tertiary institutions set minimum entry scores for each curriculum based on the number of available spaces in a program

and the number of students seeking admission. As a result, many students are not admitted to higher education. In such a system, tertiary educators can make certain assumptions regarding student aptitudes and abilities. They assume and expect college-level abilities in English and mathematics as well as competence in subject areas relevant to a particular curriculum. Developmental or remedial education is of little importance; it is rarely needed.

There is, however, an erroneous assumption regarding communication skills. It is assumed that the skills of reading and writing (literacy) ensure a concomitant competence in the oral communication skills of speaking and listening (oracy). Despite the persistence of such perceptions on the part of some educators in Australian tertiary institutions, listening instruction is, in many State curricula, an integral part of Australian elementary education.

The development of listening education in Australia can be enlightening to American academics interested in improving listening instruction. To this end, the recommendations in this paper represent a distillation of findings and conclusions based on studying and providing listening instruction in the United States and Australia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Listening instruction should begin in and be part of the elementary school curriculum.
2. Listening tests should be adapted to specific populations.
3. In the speech communication curriculum, listening should be taught early and often.
4. Listening instruction should emphasize all forms of listening.

RECOMMENDATION #1: Listening Instruction Should Begin in and Be Part of the Elementary School Curriculum.

In Australia, listening is considered an important, separate and teachable communication skill. This claim is rarely disputed. Seminal studies by Australian researchers (Spearrit, 1962; Clark, 1973; Duff and Clark, 1976; Bourke and Holzer, 1977) as well as more recent American research, have dispelled arguments claiming that listening is undifferentiated from general verbal comprehension or that listening cannot be taught. As a result, listening has become an integral part of the Australian elementary education curriculum. In large part, the locus of listening research in Australia is responsible for its status. Researchers such as Spearritt and Clark represented Schools of Education. As a result, they saw to it that listening was included in the curriculum and that listening tests were developed.

In Australia, listening instruction is the responsibility of the elementary school teacher. Duff and Clark's massive and national study of Australian teachers reported that almost half of the surveyed primary school teachers devoted one or more hours a week to planned listening instruction. Unfortunately, this devotion to listening instruction often ends at the primary school level.

Australian academics believe that listening, like reading, should be taught in the primary schools. For many American students, however, the first exposure to listening instruction occurs at the college level. Australian educators would maintain that postponing listening instruction until college is illogical. Listening instruction at the elementary school level teaches a skill essential to a student's academic achievement. It is too late or too difficult to change poor listening habits by the time a student reaches college.

Based on the Australian lesson, American listening scholars and teachers should consider re-doubling their efforts to make listening instruction an integral part of the basic elementary education curriculum.

RECOMMENDATION #2: Listening Tests Should Be Adapted to Specific Populations.

Australian listening tests have been developed by and for primary school systems. These include such instruments as the New South Wales Basic Skills Listening Test 1 (Fraser and Dunn, 1964), the Australian Council for Educational Research (A.C.E.R.) Listening Tests (Holzer, 1981) and the Progressive Achievement Tests: Listening Comprehension developed by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (Elley and Reid, 1971).

Most listening tests in America have been been developed by individual researchers (e.g. Brown-Carlson, Watson-Barker, etc.) or separate educational research institutions (e.g. Sequential Tests for Educational Progress: Listening Comprehension). Despite the availability of numerous listening tests, it often is difficult to choose a test which is appropriate for a specific student population. The Australian example suggests a more useful model for the development of such instruments.

The Australian example maintains that listening tests should be designed with carefully targeted audiences in mind. This approach is a basic assumption for reading tests. The same should apply to listening. Not only should these assumptions be applied to variables such as word comprehension, and idea identification, but assessment instruments also should be adapted to the backgrounds or cultural literacy of subjects. As Hirsch (1987, p. 42) demonstrated "variations in reading skill...can be attributed to variations in relevant background knowledge." This background or "cultural" variable can be

demonstrated with a sample from the A.C.E.R. Listening Test for 14-year old students. The test uses an audio cassette which varies the form and style of its content. In the section on Comprehending Passages, students listen to portions of an Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio program called "The World We Live In." The following paragraph is a transcribed excerpt from this program:

> Last Tuesday Cyclone Alby generated a wind storm which swept across the coast whipping up a gigantic dust storm which enveloped the Perth metropolitan area, about lunch time. The hundred and twenty kilometre an hour winds also whipped up the sea, blowing clouds of salt spray over the power stations and supply lines along the southern coast of W.A....
>
> Sample Question: When did the dust storm envelope Perth?
>
> -lunch time
> -tea time
> -midnight
> -Thursday

Fourteen-year old American students would have difficulty doing well on this listening test. They wouldn't know that tea time is dinner time. They might not understand that a cyclone is the same as a hurricane or be able to translate 120 kilometre winds into a force they could understand. They probably wouldn't know that "W.A." is the accepted abbreviation and common referent for the state of Western Australia.

In more subtle ways, American tests may have such background biases. A personal example best illustrates this point. In administering the Watson-Barker test to community college

students, the amount of time between questions had to be lengthened to adapt to the reading ability and reading rates of such students. Before increasing the number of seconds between questions, students complained that they didn't have time to read all the alternatives on the answer sheets. Teachers who use standardized tests should be sensitive to the ways in which tests may bias results for a particular group of listeners.

As an addition to or as a substitute for such standardized tests, instructor-designed assessment instruments may prove useful. The Duff and Clark study revealed a high use of such self-made tests by Australian teachers. These individualized tests can be highly effective, particularly if the purpose of assessment is to create awareness of or sensitivity to listening habits.

In terms of assessment, the lesson to be learned from Australia suggests the development and use of highly specialized tests as well as self-made teacher tests for listening instruction.

Recommendation #3: In the Speech Communication Curriculum, Listening Should Be Taught Early and Often.

In Australia, listening instruction occurs at all primary grade levels. It is not taught once and abandoned. Lessons are reinforced throughout a youngsters academic career. The same model can be applied to the teaching of listening in American colleges.

The evolution of instruction in communication apprehension in American colleges can serve as an analogous model for the teaching of listening. The study and understanding of communication apprehension is not restricted to a separate class or a graduate seminar. Because communication apprehension applies to all forms of discourse, it should be included early and often in the basic communication course. Presenting one short lecture on overcoming stage fright before the first round of classroom speeches is inadequate. The same applies to listening instruction.

A short unit introducing the subject of listening should be included at the beginning of a course. Throughout the semester the instructor should reinforce the importance of listening in all forms of discourse. The following suggestions are a short list of ways to apply listening instruction common exercises:

1. Listening Checks. Throughout or after a lecture, the instructor can ask for a listening check. Students often see verbatim note taking, rather than understanding or interpretation, as the primary goal goal of listening to a lecture.

2. Central Ideas. After a student's oral presentation, the teacher can ask listeners to identify the central idea of the speech or the speaker's choice of supporting materials.

3. Mood Cues. Student observers can be asked to identify the hidden agendas or unexpressed attitudes in a classroom group discussion.

4. Fallacies. After a lecture on fallacies, students can be asked to identify arguments and/or fallacies in a video-taped/filmed speech.

None of these suggestions is a revolutionary teaching technique. As they are processed, however, the role of listening can be emphasized and reinforced. If listening instruction is not part of the elementary school curriculum, the lesson learned from Australia is that it should be taught early and often, regardless of academic level.

RECOMMENDATION #4: Listening Instruction Should Emphasize All Forms of Listening.

As classified by Wolvin and Coakley, listening occurs at a variety of levels -- appreciation, discrimination, comprehension, therapeutic and critical. In reviewing the content of listening instruction in Australia, it is clear that comprehensive listening receives the central, and in some cases, only focus. The Duff and Clark study (p. 30) attempted to determine what Australian teachers consider to be the main purposes of teaching listening. Teachers ranked the purposes of listening in the following order of importance:

1 To improve speech
1 To gain enjoyment
3 To improve one's vocabulary
3 To improve attention span
5 To obtain information
6 To become sensitive to rhyme and rhythm in poetry
7. To gain aesthetic pleasure
8. To widen outlook through vicarious experience
9. To heighten emotional experience
10. To appreciate the imagery of language
11. To grasp the speaker's point of view
12. To discriminate between good and poor literature

The first five purposes of listening were classified as being of the "utmost importance" by a majority (mostly in excess of 50%) of teachers in each state. Duff and Clark (p. 35) concluded that, overall, the major purpose of teaching listening for most Australian teachers was cognitive and designed to improve communication so that more information may be obtained. In short, comprehension was the most important focus of listening instruction. The remaining seven purposes were predominantly aesthetic (appreciative listening). Even the one example of discriminitive listening was designed to improve appreciation (i.e. to become sensitive to rhyme and rhythm in poetry).

What is equally interesting is the low ranking of critical listening and the total absence of therapeutic listening. The experience of this writer would confirm the finding that critical listening is not taught or emphasized in the Australian curriculum. Although students could parrot entire lectures on written examinations, they were less skilled in analyzing a claim or presenting an argument. Not only hadn't they learned to grasp a lecturer's point of view but they had difficulty discriminating between good and poor arguments.

The absence of therapeutic listening can be explained, in part, by the grade level of the teachers. Therapeutic listening plays a significant role in the Psychology curriculum at most

tertiary institutions in Australia. Psychology majors are well versed in the theory and practice of therapeutic listening. Students in other curricula, however, have little exposure or experience with this level of listening.

The lesson to be learned from Australia regarding this recommendation takes the form of a premonition. Listening instruction should cover all forms or levels of listening. Although the Australian students were among the best comprehensive listeners this writer has ever taught, they seemed at a loss when asked to evaluate an argument or analyze a substantive concept.

CONCLUSION

There is a wealth of research and materials on listening in Australia. Some of it provides lessons that can help improve listening instruction. Other examples demonstrate the shortcomings to certain approaches. In either case, the exploration and sharing of research questions and pedagogical methods can be of significant value for scholars and teachers in both countries. It is hoped that this paper provides an impetus for further exchange of ideas between listening colleagues in Australia and the United States.

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